

Madalyn Letellier

From: Stephanie Scherpf [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, December 12, 2024 5:05 PM
To: Public Comments
Subject: Armory Master Plan comments - Stephanie Scherpf
Attachments: Stephanie Scherpf Remarks Finance Committee Meeting 12.10.24.pdf

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The Armory Master Plan Draft prioritizes "producing arts" in the Armory via the Armory Master Plan, when in fact, "presenting arts" has been done to a larger degree historically in the Armory. Both are important, and both can co-exist at the Armory but I just find it untrue to the past, present and desired future of the building that "presenting arts" is not highlighted as much. In terms of arts production, there are going to be a lot of limitations related to what can be produced due to inadequate ventilation, lack of soundproofing, etc.

Also, I think more thought needs to be given to the type of tenants that the City is going to be seeking to attract via the RFP process. How is the City going to attract not just artists but potential tenants to the building? Are prospective tenants going to want to sign up for the conditions being proposed in the Armory Master Plan and the uncertainty of a City-controlled building? How is the City going to attract not just artists, but artists with small businesses, arts entrepreneurs, artist collectives, and small arts non-profit arts organizations with these conditions? Providing space for artists is critical, and that can be done in a variety of ways, including through the hourly/daily rental of spaces, but I think more attention needs to be placed on small arts businesses, arts entrepreneurs, artist collectives and small arts non-profit arts organizations for the long-term health and sustainability of the building.

In a meeting with Rachel Nadkarni, she said that she would revise the current plan such that an **existing non-profit organization** could eventually be chosen to govern the Armory.

Also attaching the full version of the comments I prepared for the 12/10/24 Finance Committee meeting. I highlighted those comments I was able to deliver orally at the Public Hearing.

Thank you.

Stephanie Scherpf
Co-Director, CEO
The Center for Arts at the Armory
[REDACTED]

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#)

Good evening. My name is Stephanie Scherpf, and I am a Co-Director and CEO at the Center for Arts at the Armory. Thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight. Thank you to the City staff who worked on the Armory Master Plan.

The City took 2.5 years to get community input to write an Armory Master Plan Draft. The Armory Master Plan Draft comes to a conclusion that the community said they didn't want—a City-controlled governance model for the building. City staff will say, "but there is a path toward independence; everything will be the same for the tenants." I am going to tell you why this is not the case. Most of the 49 pages of the Armory Master Plan is not actually a plan. We have no idea how much this plan will cost taxpayers—will the advisory board be paid? What is the cost of City staff time proposed here? What are the financial and operating plans for the new non-profit organization or quasi municipal trust? What about the capital costs of the building? Related to any specifics on financials all we are given is one table on p. 41 that sketches out how much it *might* cost to run the building at four different levels. We have no idea what the proposed rent structure might be. We don't have any information about the RFP. There are no timelines, governance charter or bylaws.

This plan might not be explicitly kicking us out but it would make it so difficult for us we could not possibly choose to stay. That is what this plan promises to continue to do. Arts at the Armory has no future with this plan because this plan is going to stagnate over many years and make it impossible for us to operate.

One of the few pieces of new information that we've been told in the Armory Master Plan is that a 5-person City-selected Armory Advisory Board is going to start making decisions about the Armory. These people will be controlled by City staff. The plan states:

"City staff will be needed to assist the Advisory Board in planning and organizing all aspects of daily administration of the property as a public arts center, as well as advising the Advisory Board on management policy."

Where is the City going to find these volunteers? They will be involved in conflict mediation, community relations, extensive and ongoing evaluation through surveying of multiple communities, fundraising, marketing, real estate acquisition, facilities management, and more. We have seen what this has looked like already when the City formed an Armory Advisory Group made of community artists, City staff, and Councilor Gomez Mouakad. Even Councilor Gomez Mouakad said she had no business being in the Group. The history, the particularities, the decision-making, the stakes and the industry specific nature of the Armory are simply too much for your average community member to grapple with. There is a difference between being an advisor, and performing the work of what should be paid experts and personnel. Meanwhile, the in-house expertise is there, amongst the current Armory tenants, who continue to be ignored.

The plan doesn't even mention some of the basic ideas that came out of the many community meetings, like the interest in the 3rd party operator model, and the idea of a tenant-involved governance model.

City staff will often tell us, "you don't understand, this is now a public building and a public process. It wouldn't be legal to engage the anchor tenant in building governance or management." I would like to request a legal statement from the City citing why a non-profit organization cannot be involved in planning for the future of a City-owned building. Why can't a non-profit organization be involved in building governance and management? Or better yet, why a governing board of tenants, neighbors, artists, and City staff can't make decisions together about the Armory. We are not going to write the RFP, and we're not going to be involved in evaluating the RFP. We want to leave that to City staff.

If there is anyone out there who has experience in real estate or municipal law who can help us, please let me know. From our side, we will put together a legal document that explains why it is not best practice for a municipality to operate a building like the Armory, and why a City should actually be sending building governance and management services out for RFP as opposed to deciding on its own to govern and manage a building like this. My colleagues and I did the research—we got the agreements between the Boston Center for the Arts and the City of Boston, between the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center and the City of New Bedford, the Foundry and the Multicultural Center for the Arts and the City of Cambridge, among many others. So it's possible to do this all across the state but it's not possible in Somerville apparently.

So what is next? The only real hope here is that we can get to the RFP process before the end of June, which is the deadline we've given the City to prevent us from folding our organization. From there the hope would be that we would win the RFP to operate the Performance Hall and the Cafe. But right now we are between a rock and a hard place. We can only get to the RFP if the Armory Master Plan is approved. How does anyone approve this Armory Master Plan in its current form? We are asking the City to revise the current Master Plan and remove the idea of the 5 person Armory Advisory Board, or at least make it possible for tenants to serve on the Board. We are asking for the City to remove the idea of forming a new non-profit organization or quasi municipal trust. Instead, we are asking that the City and Arts at the Armory come together to devise a plan for Armory governance and management in order to form a tenant-involved governance board that also includes City reps, neighbors and artists.

Not only are our proposed revisions much more time-efficient, they make financial sense. The expertise is already built into the Armory building. There is no need to spend time and expense funding City staff and more consultants to figure this out. There is no need to spend time and expense creating new organizations and quasi municipal trusts. Our experience, expertise and leadership are just waiting to be leveraged. As a non-profit organization we have the ability, motivation and skill to be successful at applying for capital grants for the building, in conjunction with the City.

I am hopeful that the City will make the necessary revisions to the Plan, and we can move the process forward and get started with the RFP. Thank you for the opportunity to make these remarks. Thank you to City Council and the community at large for your support.

Madalyn Letellier

From: Darci Hanna <[REDACTED]>
Sent: Tuesday, December 17, 2024 1:20 PM
To: Public Comments
Subject: Public Comments re: Finance Committee Mtg. 12/10/24 & Somerville Armory Master Plan

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Darci Hanna
[REDACTED] Somerville, MA 02145
Somerville Armory Master Plan

I was disheartened to finally see the Somerville Armory Master Plan, which doesn't seem to take into account the incredible organization and tenants already present in the building. In particular, Somerville can't afford to lose the Arts at the Armory organization. Their programming adds vibrancy to our city, supports many creators and creative small businesses, and needs to be supported in meaningful and significant ways by the city and the Somerville Arts Council. I've attended many events at the Armory over the years, from summer camp theater productions, film showings, the Winter Farmers Market, and Herbstalk to the recent Somerville Flea Market. I even went into labor with my first child at the Armory! My children have attended camp there, we've eaten at the cafe, and we attend music lessons taught by Jennifer McSweeney of Acoustic Strings of New England. The current tenants urgently need a long term lease for at least one year, and longer if possible, so they can continue operating while the city sorts itself out. Leaving the current tenants in constant limbo makes their jobs significantly harder, it grinds people down and sours them on Somerville's arts and civic leaders. Please do right by the people who are already doing wonderful work in the community and help them build back even better by supporting their efforts, giving them a long term lease, and not expecting the Armory to be fully self-supporting. If Somerville's leaders truly value the arts, they need to put their money where their mouth is and reasonably subsidize the Armory, knowing that the intangible benefits of their arts and culture offerings make our community a good place to live and attract more profitable businesses to our area in a mutually beneficial loop.

Madalyn Letellier

From: K Molloy [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, December 31, 2024 5:11 PM
To: Public Comments
Cc: All City Council
Subject: My comments on the City's Armory Master Plan

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Hello all, I recently watched the Finance committee meeting presentation on, and discussion about, the City's Armory Master Plan.

I don't understand why the City has taken 3 years to come up with a plan that basically kicks the can down the road. As was expressed at the meeting, it's "a concept of a plan." And I'm frustrated that the City is basically opting to do precisely what the community has recommended against -- more than once and loudly -- that the City be involved in running the Armory through its own handpicked advisory board. This makes me wonder what all the community meetings of the past 3 years were for.

Relatedly, I'm appalled that the City has been a poor landlord, particularly with Arts at the Armory, without issuing a workable lease in all this time that would allow the organization to conduct its excellent work with some planning. (It's particularly odd when the City prides itself as being supportive of tenants rights.) The City's handling of the Armory in the past 3 years does not bode well for it to continue to do so going forward. It's hard to believe that the planners and consulting firm involved in the Armory Master Plan really examined how other similar nonprofits are organized/run. I agree with the suggestion that was raised at the Finance Committee meeting that at the very least the City should examine how the Somerville Medea Center has been structured all these years (most of which were in a City-owned building).

Best regards and Happy New Year,

Karen Molloy
[REDACTED],
(Abutter to the Armory)

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[REDACTED]